

WASHINGTON, DC -- Congresswoman Linda Sánchez gave the following speech on the floor of the House of Representatives today, supporting H. Res. 721 which recognizes the 60th anniversary of the Mendez v. Westminster decision ending segregation of Mexican and Mexican American students in California. The case set a precedent for the Supreme Court's decision to end segregation in Brown v. Board of Education. Congresswoman Sánchez managed the debate time on the resolution.

"Mr. Speaker, H. Res. 721 recognizes the 60th anniversary of the Mendez v. Westminster School District decision which ended segregation of Mexican and Mexican American students in California schools, and honors the Mendez family.

"I want to commend the Gentleman from Texas (Mr. Gonzalez) for introducing this important resolution, which I am proud to cosponsor.

"As the daughter of Mexican immigrants, this decision has special meaning for me. Like the parents in the Mendez case, my parents understood the importance of education in the realization of the American dream. Thanks to their efforts and encouragement, all seven of their children have excelled, earning college and advanced degrees.

"The Mendez decision really marked a turning point in the effort to win full rights for all Californians of Mexican descent. While the court ruled on narrow grounds that California law did not authorize the school district to create separate, so-called "Mexican schools," the importance and effect of that decision went much further.

"The words of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 9th Circuit are worth repeating:

*'By enforcing the segregation of school children of Mexican descent against their will and contrary to the laws of California, [the school district] may have violated the federal law as provided in the Fourteenth Amendment to the Federal Constitution by depriving them of liberty and property without due process of law and by denying to them the equal protection of the laws.'*

"Seven years later, the Supreme Court would finally put an end to the discredited doctrine which allowed school segregation based on the fiction of "separate but equal" schools in the landmark decision Brown v. Board of Education.

"The author of that decision, Chief Justice Earl Warren, had, as Governor of California, responded to the Mendez decision by signing into law a repeal of the last remaining school segregation statutes in the California Education Code.

"This resolution also "honors the Mendez family and congratulate[s] Sylvia Mendez for her continued efforts to keep alive the importance of this case and the impact it had on her future." It is important that we not forget the courage of this family. They took a stand against the prevailing system of segregation in the public schools and won a tremendous victory.

"I am a beneficiary of their courage and their achievement. The story of the Mendez family's

struggle against school segregation took place in Westminster, Orange County -- just a few miles from where my siblings and I grew up, played soccer and went to school. If the Mendez family had not challenged the status quo, and if I had not grown up a post-Mendez Orange County, it would have taken me many more years to reach the floor of this House, if at all.

“School segregation in California was just one facet of the widespread discrimination that Americans of Mexican descent faced across the Southwest, from the Gulf coast to the Pacific coast. Hotels, restaurants, barber shops, public pools, movie theatres, and even maternity wards were segregated for those of Mexican heritage. It was very common to see signs that read “No Mexicans served” or “Mexicans and Dogs Not Allowed.”

“The injustice of discrimination was most appalling in public education: in the 1930s, more than two-thirds of the Orange County students of Mexican descent were considered as “mentally retarded.” When the Mendez children were turned away from the 17th Street “White school” in their home town, they were sent to the Hover Elementary “Mexican school” which was a rickety, wooden building on a dirt lot. Adding insult to injury, many of such “Mexican Schools” operated half days during walnut picking season to accommodate local agribusiness demands for child labor.

“Mr. Speaker, there are forces in our society today who believe that the cause of school integration, of diversity, no longer matter. Some believe that fighting segregation might even violate our Constitution.

“That is wrong. The Supreme Court in Brown correctly found that separate cannot be equal. As we reflect on this anniversary of the Mendez decision, we must renew our determination to fight injustice and the forces of intolerance. Our nation will continue to benefit from our diversity.

“I join the members of this House in commemorating this important milestone in our nation’s history, and honoring the Mendez family for their courage, their strength, and their contribution to the American dream.”